



## **KEEPING WORKERS SAFE DURING OIL SPILL RESPONSE AND CLEANUP: UPDATE ON OSHA ACTIVITIES**

[June 8, 2010]

Oil spill workers are on the front lines of the nation's response to the Deepwater Horizon disaster. At this time, there are over 13,000 cleanup workers employed by BP or its contractors; 1,700 boats are supporting the response operations; and more than 1,800 Federal employees are directly involved in the cleanup operations over four states.

Depending on their jobs, these workers can face hazards from heat, falls, drowning, fatigue, loud noise, sharp objects, as well as bites from insects, snakes, and other wild species native to the Gulf Coast area. Workers may also face exposure to crude oil, oil constituents and byproducts, dispersants, cleaning products and other chemicals being used in the cleanup process. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is providing proactive, vigorous leadership to ensure that workers are protected from all hazards.

OSHA is working as part of the coordinated federal response which includes the U.S. Coast Guard and other government agencies that deal with health and the environment and BP to ensure that workers are protected from all hazards associated with their cleanup work.

- OSHA is participating in the Gulf Coast cleanup to ensure the safety and health of employees involved in the oil spill response and cleanup operations.
- OSHA is working with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) to ensure that appropriate training is provided to workers that BP is hiring to help cleanup the oil. Emphasis is placed on ensuring workers were trained in a language and vocabulary they understand. OSHA, along with NIEHS, continues to monitor this program. In response to recently received information, OSHA is in the process of increasing the training requirement for crews on vessels engaged in offshore oil recovery.
- OSHA personnel were deployed to the Gulf the week of April 26<sup>th</sup>. Since then OSHA personnel have been deployed to all 17 staging areas in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. OSHA staff is on the ground monitoring worker safety and health and assessing whether BP is providing appropriate worker safety and health protections. In coordination with the U.S. Coast Guard, OSHA staff also board near-shore vessels doing booming, skimming operations, and in situ burning operations, and are stationed on offshore vessels for longer periods.

- Every day, between 20 and 25 OSHA compliance officers travel to all staging areas to ensure that workers are protected from safety and health hazards. OSHA staff is in the field and on boats to make sure BP is protecting cleanup workers from health and safety hazards. In addition, OSHA's Health Response Team (from Salt Lake City) arrived in Louisiana on May 6<sup>th</sup> to provide technical support (for worker exposure monitoring) to OSHA response site personnel.
- As of today, the OSHA staff has made over 560 site visits, both unannounced and coordinated with BP, covering all 17 staging areas, and many of the active worksites on shore and near shore.
- When OSHA finds safety problems on site visits or learns about them from workers, it brings them to the attention of BP and makes sure they are corrected. OSHA also raises its concerns through the Unified Command so they are addressed across the entire response area. OSHA is ensuring that workers are provided, free of charge, appropriate personal protective equipment such as boots, gloves and other protective equipment as needed.
- At this time, a key health concern of OSHA's is serious heat-related illnesses. Fatigue, from working long hours, is also a problem.

### **Monitoring Chemical Exposures**

Potential health effects from inhaling chemicals such as oil, weathered oil, oil dispersants, cleaning agents, and others are an ongoing concern that OSHA is continuing to monitor, assess and characterize.

Aside from those workers on ships directly adjacent to the leak who are exposed to fresh oil, most of the cleanup workers are exposed to weathered oil, where the toxic volatile substances have evaporated.

To ensure that workers are not exposed to dangerous levels of toxic chemicals, OSHA reviewed the BP monitoring data and has brought in a team of industrial hygienists to conduct its own independent air monitoring both on shore and on the cleanup vessels. OSHA will characterize worker exposures in each job task so that workers can receive necessary protections from air contaminants. The Agency has developed a sampling protocol and strategy that is available on the [OSHA web page](#). Additionally, OSHA is posting our sampling results with clear information about where the samples were collected and what jobs the workers were doing when they were monitored.

OSHA is also analyzing the "soup" of crude oil, oil by-products, dispersants, and any other material to determine what hazards the mixture might present workers as they respond to and cleanup the oil spill.

Finally, OSHA is monitoring other chemical exposures, such as exposures from chemical solvents used to clean boats, to determine whether workers are being appropriately protected from these exposures.

### **Protecting Workers from Chemical Exposures**

OSHA is aware that reports of health symptoms experienced by some workers has raised concern among workers and the public about short and long-term health effects of the oil products and dispersants, and that there have been questions about why OSHA is not at this time recommending the use of respiratory protection.

Based on monitoring data collected by OSHA and other government agencies such as Environmental Protection Agency, as well as BP, OSHA has found no exposures to toxic chemicals (including oil and dispersants) that would necessitate the use of respirators for cleanup workers.

Respirators can present serious health problems for workers who may have heart or respiratory conditions. OSHA's respiratory protection standard therefore requires that all workers who must wear respirators undergo a medical examination, fit testing and training on care and use of respirators. Because of the potential health problems associated with respirators and the high heat and humidity conditions in the Gulf area, OSHA does not recommend the use of respirators unless a toxic chemical threat is identified.

Should OSHA find that the hazard characteristics of the oil change or should OSHA identify any other toxic chemical threats to worker health, we will immediately reassess and readjust our training and worker protection requirements accordingly.

---

### **Health Effects Follow-up**

OSHA is working closely with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the Department of Health and Human Services Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) to investigate the causes of health effects suffered by workers. NIOSH is conducting Health Hazard Evaluations to determine the causes of worker illnesses (including an investigation into the recent incident where seven fishermen were sent to the hospital). NIOSH is also assembling a roster of workers who are participating in the response effort that will help in assessing respiratory hazards from exposure to oil or other substances present in the cleanup operations.

OSHA is also working with ASPR and NIOSH to establish a long-term health surveillance program for the workers involved in this event.

### **Worker Rights**

All workers involved in the oil spill response and cleanup have the right to a safe workplace just as they would in any other job. They are also protected if they are fired or in any way retaliated against for raising safety concerns to an employer, participating in

safety and health activities or exercising their rights under the Act. Workers may file a complaint with OSHA if they believe that their employer is not following OSHA standards or there are serious hazards. OSHA keeps worker information confidential.

If workers think their work is unsafe or if they are unsure, they should have been instructed to STOP and ASK their supervisor. They can also call OSHA at **1-800-321-OSHA (6742)**. TTY **1-877-889-5627**.

For more information, visit OSHA's oil spill cleanup response Web page:  
<https://www.osha.gov/oilspills/index.html>